

LINCOLN LORE

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MY CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH—A. LINCOLN

I was born February 12, 1809, near where Hodgenville now is, then in Hardin now in the more recently formed County of LaRue, Kentucky, as my parents have told me I was born on Nolin (River) a mile or a mile and a half from Hodgen's Mill. My parents being dead and my own memory not serving I know no means of identifying the precise locality.

It seems as if the question whether my first name is "Abraham" or "Abram" will never be settled. It is "Abraham." It is my father's understanding that Abraham, Mordecai, and Thomas are old family names of ours.

I have no brothers or sisters of the whole or half blood. I had a sister born in Elizabethtown (Kentucky) older than myself who was grown and married but died many years ago leaving no child; also a brother younger than myself who died in infancy.

Before leaving Kentucky my sister and I were sent for short periods to A B C schools, the first kept by Zachariah Riney and the second by Caleb Hazel. At this time my father resided on Knob Creek on the road from Bardstown to Nashville, Tennessee, at a point three or three and a half miles south or southwest of Atherton Ferry on the Rolling Fork. The place on Knob Creek I remember very well.

My father removed from Kentucky to Indiana in my eighth year. We reached our new home about the time the state came into the Union. It was a wild region, with many bears and other wild animals still in the woods. There I grew up. In my tenth year I was kicked by a horse and apparently killed for a time. I was raised to farm work, which I continued until I was twenty-two.

In an unbroken forest the clearing away of surplus wood was the great task ahead. I had an ax put into my hand at once, though very young was large for my age, and from that till within my twenty-third year I was most constantly handling that most useful instrument—less of course in plowing and harvesting seasons.

I took an early start as a hunter which was never much improved afterwards. A few days before the completion of my eighth year in the absence of my father, a flock of wild turkeys approached the new log cabin and I with a rifle gun standing on the inside shot through a crack and killed one of them. I have never since pulled a trigger on any large game.

My father's residence continued in the same place in Indiana till 1830. While here I went to A B C schools by littles, kept successively by Andrew Crawford,¹ Swaney and Azel W. Dorsey. I do not remember any other. The family of Mr. Dorsey now resides in Schuyler County, Illinois.

No qualification was ever required of a teacher beyond "readin'," "writin'" and "cipherin'" to the Rule of Three. If a straggler supposed to understand Latin happened to sojourn in the neighborhood, he was looked upon as a wizard. Away back in my childhood, the earliest days of my being able to read, I got hold of a small book, Weems' "Life of Washington." I remember all the accounts there given of the battle-fields and struggles for the liberties of the country, and none fixed themselves upon my imagination so deeply as the struggle at Trenton, New Jersey. The crossing of the river, the contest with the Hessians, the great hardships endured at that time, all fixed themselves on my memory more than any single Revolutionary event; and you all know how these early impressions last longer than any others. I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that these men struggled for.

The aggregate of all my schooling did not amount to one year. There was absolutely nothing to excite ambition for an education. Of course, when I became of age I did not know much. Still, somehow, I could read, write and cipher to the Rule of Three; but that was all. The little advance I now have upon this store of education, I have picked up under the pressure of necessity.

I was never in a college or academy as a student, and never inside of a college or academy building till since I had a law license. What I have in the way of education has been picked up. After I was twenty-three I studied English Grammar—imperfectly, of course; but so as to speak and write as well as I now do. I studied and nearly mastered the six books of Euclid since I was a member of Congress. I regret my want of education and do what I can to supply the want.

When I was nineteen, still residing in Indiana, I made my first trip upon a flat boat to New Orleans. There I saw slavery and slave markets as I have never seen them in Kentucky, and I heard worse of the Red River plantations. I was a hired hand merely and the son of the owner and I without other assistance made the trip. The nature of the "cargoload," as it was called, made it necessary for us to linger and trade along the sugar coast, and one night we were attacked by seven negroes with intent to kill and rob us. We were hurt some in the melee but succeeded in driving the negroes from the boat and then "cut cable," "weighed anchor" and left.

1. Now thought to have been James Swaney.

Editor's Note—This number of Lincoln Lore contains the second of a series of autobiographical sketches compiled from the writings of Abraham Lincoln which will appear from time to time in this bulletin. Every word used is just as Lincoln wrote it with the exception of substituting the first person for the third person as used by Lincoln in the sketch he prepared for John L. Scripps in 1859. L. A. W.